

Jędrzej Piekara

Russian-Venezuelan Relations as a Factor in Russian Geopolitics¹

In the decade after the Soviet collapse, Moscow's room to manoeuvre in Latin America and the Caribbean was limited due to the scarcity of resources and reorientation of Russian diplomacy towards the West, which naturally lowered the region's strategic weight in Russian thinking. The turn came in the early 2000s as a re-entry organised around reciprocity in the United States own sphere of influence, which was paired with renewed attention to former Cold War partners and to governments openly positioned against U.S. policies. Within this recalibrated approach, Caracas appeared as an unusually willing counterpart: ties intensified after Hugo Chávez sought direct backing from Vladimir Putin in 2000, and by 2004, Venezuela's oil-rent-driven foreign policy was being used to draw nearer to states challenging the prevailing international order, Russia included.

The recent event of the U.S. invasion of Venezuela and seizure of its president is a direct attack on Russian interests in South America and the Western hemisphere – this action clearly suggests a deliberate interest by the U.S. to clear its closest regions of Russian influence.

Most contemporary studies on Venezuela focus either on the Caracas regime's internal crisis or the dynamics of its relationship with Washington. Within this framework, Russia's role is often treated as marginal or merely as a backdrop to U.S. policy. This commentary reverses that perspective by analysing Venezuela as a deliberately constructed geopolitical foothold for the Kremlin, designed to asymmetrically challenge the U.S. in its own neighbourhood. Understanding this specific role is essential for a comprehensive view of Russia's global strategy.

The history of Russia-Venezuela relations. Historically, Venezuela's prominence in Moscow's regional approach has been linked to the political change that began in 1999, when Hugo Chávez advanced a demonstrative agenda of distancing the country from the U.S. – an opening that enabled Russian geopolitical experimentation and arms sales. This opening coincided with investment flows from major Russian firms, especially in the oil sector, as well as plans for long-horizon cooperation with Venezuela's national oil company around the development of a major field, which was described as potentially spanning decades and involving very large sums of money. During the same period, the relationship was also presented as expanding beyond hydrocarbons and into industrial projects, including a signed agreement to build a nuclear power plant in Venezuela. This anchoring, in turn, offered Moscow a durable foothold in a region near the U.S.

This consolidation was supported by interventions that functioned as regime-support mechanisms. In 2014, Russia provided a major financial lifeline via large prepayments for Venezuelan oil and significant investment in the hydrocarbon sector, easing pressure on a government that had increasing problems with keeping financing secure. Over time, the political dimension has continued to be reinforced, for example, through swift diplomatic endorsement of Nicolás Maduro's electoral outcome in 2024. After 2022, this stance has been framed as "symbolic reciprocity".

The military pillar of the relationship has been built on asymmetry; between 2000 and 2017, Venezuela absorbed the overwhelming share of Russian arms sales to Latin America. Strategic bombers were sent to Caracas in late

¹ This commentary has been written using extensive sources produced by think-tanks such as The Wilson Center, Brookings Institution, Atlantic Council, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Polish Institute of International Affairs (Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, PISM), Centre for Eastern Studies (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, OSW), Institut Montaigne, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Fondation pour la recherche stratégique (FRS), Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri), NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

2018 amid rising international pressure, and the S-300 air-defence system was deployed in early 2019. Alongside these actions, the 2019 political crisis also involved the arrival of several hundred Russian private military contractors tasked with Maduro's personal security.

Since 2022, Russia has leaned on military diplomacy as a low-cost way of sustaining influence and projecting the image of an unwavering ally. In practice, this has meant at least nine military interactions since 2022, Venezuela's hosting of part of Russia's International Army Games in 2022, and the opening of a facility producing ammunition for Russian-designed Kalashnikov systems. It has also included training of Venezuelan cadets at a Russian military engineering institution focused on advanced technologies such as drones, robotic systems, and remote mining. The reappearance of Russian naval assets in the Western Hemisphere also shows how the Venezuelan theatre can be used to externalise pressure and to demonstrate reach beyond Europe.

Venezuela's role in Russian geopolitics. To truly grasp Venezuela's place in Russian geopolitics, the relationship should be treated as a platform for challenging the U.S. in its own hemisphere and, in many cases, for complicating Washington's partnerships across Latin America. In this logic, engagement with Caracas is cast as "symbolic reciprocity": calibrated and demonstrative steps designed to answer U.S. policies towards Ukraine and towards opposition forces in Russia's neighbouring regions. The enabling environment for such activity has also been linked to a historically widespread scepticism toward U.S. influence in parts of the region, which creates political space for external actors seeking to limit U.S. reach while presenting themselves as defenders of sovereignty. Venezuela has often described as a front-runner for anti-Americanism in the Western Hemisphere, and as a node through which anti-Western ideological messaging can be spread.

A further layer of Venezuela's role concerns its attachment to alternative institutional projects, especially its pursuit of BRICS as a route to financing, currency diversification, and geopolitical autonomy against the West. Under sanctions pressure and amid intensified U.S.-China rivalry, Caracas has deepened reliance on Beijing and Moscow. From Moscow's point of view, BRICS is often presented as the foundation for a post-American order, including work on alternative instruments that would bolster resilience against Western sanctions while keeping external economic links open. This convergence has shown up diplomatically as well, including an invitation for Nicolás Maduro to attend a BRICS+ meeting where Venezuela's potential application could be discussed.

Asymmetrical relations with Venezuela have served as a symbolic answer to U.S. actions. In exchange for arms, money, and other forms of support, Russia obtained a significant foothold in South America that was meant to advance its great-power ambitions. Russia's goal was to act as a great power in all regions of the world, not limiting itself to Europe or the Middle East, but also reaching out to the closest regions of its main adversary. The Kremlin has declared a priority of supporting states "under pressure" in securing sovereignty and independence, which has to be interpreted as an idealistic cover for partnerships that also function as geopolitical leverage points.

Conclusions. For Central and Eastern Europe, the history of Russia-Venezuela relations serves as a lesson in viewing security through a global lens. The frequent omission of the Venezuelan factor, as well as other actors from the Global South, in European debates on Russia is a mistake, as it suggests that Moscow's aggressive actions on NATO's eastern flank are disconnected from its activities in the Western Hemisphere or other regions. In reality, Russian foreign policy treats regions as interconnected theatres: pressure exerted by Moscow in Eastern Europe is often answered through actions in distant spaces designed to stretch Western attention and complicate strategic calculations.

From a Polish perspective, the Venezuelan example underscores that security developments affecting cities in the region are linked to Moscow's activities far beyond Europe, including in the Western Hemisphere, Africa, or the Middle East. Russian influence-building in seemingly peripheral regions can indirectly weaken European security by diverting U.S. resources, shaping global narratives, and normalising Russia's role as a spoiler in the international system. In this sense, maintaining transatlantic cohesion requires recognising that developments in places such as Venezuela are not marginal, but directly relevant to the long-term durability of NATO's security guarantees.